



"Frankly, We Did Win This Election"

THE INSIDE STORY OF

HOW TRUMP LOST

Michael C. Bender

Senior White House Reporter for the Wall Street Journal

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We Did Win
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T W E L V E

NEW YORK BOSTON

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Grand Central Publishing
Hachette Book Group
1290 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10104
grandcentralpublishing.com
twitter.com/grandcentralpub

First Edition: August 2021

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Library of Congress Cataloging.in.Publication Data has been applied for.

ISBNs: 978-1-5387-3480-3 (hardcover), 978-1-5387-3481-0 (ebook)

E3-20210612-JV-NF-ORI

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Introduction

“Today is not the end. It’s just the beginning.”

—*Save America rally, Washington, January 6, 2021*

Armed Secret Service agents guarded the secret hideaway inside the U.S. Capitol, where the vice president sheltered with his wife and eldest daughter. A swarm of rioters just outside the room had smashed windows and busted through doors, and now prowled across the waxed sandstone blocks floors beneath the iconic cast-iron dome. It was January 6, 2021, and the symbolic heart of the world’s longest-standing democracy was under siege for the first time since the War of 1812. But instead of British troops in red coats, the insurrection was led by an American mob of President Donald Trump’s supporters—and they wanted his running mate’s head.

Vice President Mike Pence’s offense: He had dared to defy Trump’s order to violate the U.S. Constitution in an attempt to overturn the results of the November election. The frenzied crowd had already overrun the U.S. Capitol Police and the Metropolitan Police Department. Now, Pence’s life—and the safety of just about everyone else in the Capitol that day—rested in the hands of the National Guard.

“I want them down here—and I want them down here now,” Pence firmly instructed during a private phone call with the nation’s top military and defense officials gathered at the Pentagon.

As this book chronicles, the storming of the Capitol was the culmination of one of the nation's most intense and unnerving election cycles, one that tested the foundation of our democratic principles. I initially set out to write a traditional campaign book that would tell the story of how Trump marketed himself to a second term, or how the same traits that lifted him to victory in 2016 imperiled his reelection just four years later. I envisioned this as a deep look at cutting-edge electioneering techniques heading into the quarter mark of the twenty-first century. I anticipated explaining what those tactics told us about the cultural and socioeconomic dynamics that coursed through our politics. I wanted to document the political phenomenon of the Trump mega-rally—from the behind-the-scenes staging to the campaign's collection of personal data from attendees to the motivations of the president's supporters who waited for days outside arenas until he arrived.

But like nearly everything with Trump, there was nothing traditional about this campaign—and the story that revealed itself was far more chaotic and complicated. Without warning, a once-in-a-century pandemic forced millions of Americans to stop commuting to work, log into Zoom, and stay away from shops, restaurants, and even extended family members to avoid a mysterious and uncharted contagion. The electoral kinetics shifted just as quickly and significantly. Trump's reelection bid suddenly hinged more on his response from inside the White House to a complex global health crisis than on how his top political operatives would promote his past successes from campaign headquarters across the Potomac River. My expectations changed, too. Instead of spending the year on the campaign trail with the candidate I'd covered for five years, attending rallies produced by members of his team I'd known for just as long, I only occasionally left my house once pandemic lockdowns started in March 2020.

The result is the story of the final year of Trump's

presidency, which opens with his historic first impeachment in December 2019 and extends just beyond his unprecedented second impeachment fourteen months later. It's informed by hundreds of hours of interviews with more than 150 members of Trump's White House, Cabinet, and campaign, as well as friends and outside advisers—and also by my own occasional run-ins, phone calls, and one-on-one interviews with Trump. I traveled to Florida twice after the election, where Trump welcomed me to his Mar-a-Lago resort for a pair of lengthy discussions about the campaign. Together these accounts reveal the calculations behind the administration's response to the coronavirus pandemic; explain why top lieutenants in Trump World remained in a constant revolving door between exile and repatriation; offer inside-the-room details of the intense battles between Trump and his military advisers over whether to unleash soldiers on civil rights protests in the streets of American cities; and show how Trump spent more than twice as much money on a losing campaign as he had on a winning one. I also spent time with an eclectic group of Trump superfans who regularly slept outside for days to secure their place in the front row of his mega-rallies, and whose stories of how Trump changed their lives help explain his enduring appeal to his base.

The heart of the story, of course, is President Trump himself, whom I covered for the *Wall Street Journal* during the 2016 election, during all four years at the White House, and during the 2020 campaign. As part of my job for the newspaper, I've interviewed Trump inside his corporate office in Trump Tower, on *Air Force One*, and one-on-one in the Oval Office. Trump has praised my wavy hair as being worthy of a job in his administration. And he has complained about my reporting to my elementary-school-age daughter.

Many of my Trump World sources shared their firsthand accounts, internal campaign documents, text messages,

emails, and calendars to help reconstruct critical moments during the campaign. Some spoke for the opportunity to share what they had witnessed from their front-row seat to history. Others spoke for protective purposes, concerned that if they didn't tell their story, someone else would. And others still spoke for cathartic and almost therapeutic reasons, eager to try to process the surreal whirlwind through which they had just lived. Many spoke only on the condition of deep background, an agreement that meant I could share their stories without direct attribution.

I agreed to those conditions because my motivation to write this book was the same that compelled many of my sources to speak with me. I have had a remarkable opportunity to watch an astonishing chapter of our history unfurl, and I've been humbled by the chance I've had to speak regularly with the people who shaped it—and were shaped by it. I hope this book adds to our understanding of the people and events that have forever impacted our lives.

—Michael C. Bender, May 2021

November 9, 2016

“So, there’s good news and bad news,” said Mike Biundo, a New Hampshire-based Republican strategist for Donald J. Trump, the day Trump won the 2016 campaign.

“Oh yeah?” Trump pollster Tony Fabrizio asked. “What’s that, Mike?”

“The good news is we won,” Biundo said. “The bad news is these stupid fuckers are going to think this is the way you win a presidential election.”

Prologue

“I don’t think we’ve ever had an empty seat.”

—*Merry Christmas rally, Battle Creek, Michigan,
December 18, 2019*

Saundra Kiczenski packed her Honda Accord before dawn on one of the final days of 2019 and drove five hours from her home in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, across the Mackinac Bridge, and south along the seam of interstate asphalt stitched down the middle of the giant geological mitten tugged over the Lower Peninsula. She arrived in Battle Creek at 1:00 p.m., two and a half days early for her thirty-first Trump rally.

The fifty-six-year-old worker in the Walmart patio and garden department preferred the familiar comfort of a Wawa or Sheetz convenience store for a quick bite to eat on the road. She wore her straight brown hair in bangs, and dressed in shirts and accessories adorned with Trump’s face. Saundra was also one of the founding members of the “Front Row Joes,” a group of more than 1,500 Trump diehards who routinely traveled to see the president perform and were almost always among the first few people in line for a rally. Many had attended at least ten Trump rallies by his fourth year in office—several had notched more than fifty.

Trump rallies formed the core of one of the most steadfast political movements in modern American political

history, a dynamic that reordered the Republican Party. The president held nearly five rallies a week during his 2016 campaign and averaged one every ten days even after he was sworn in. That perpetual tour attracted a coterie of political pilgrims who traveled across the country and camped outside arenas for days at a time for the opportunity to stand in the front row and, for ninety blissfully frenzied minutes, cheer on the man they credited with changing the country and, in many cases, their own lives.

“You go to the rallies, and he basically tells you that you don’t have to put up with ‘the swamp’ and those kinds of people,” Sandra told me, standing outside a rally during Trump’s third year in office. “Because of him, I decided not to pay for Obamacare, not pay the fine. And what happened? Nothing. Before, the quiet me would have paid the fine. But Donald Trump told me that we have a voice, and now I stand up for myself.”

Sandra and her fellow Front Row Joes described, in different ways, a euphoric flow of emotions between themselves and the president, a sort of adrenaline-fueled, psychic cleansing that followed ninety minutes of chanting and cheering with 15,000 other like-minded Trump junkies. Sandra compared the energy inside a rally to the feelings she had as a teenage girl in 1980 watching the U.S. hockey team beat the Soviet Union, a victory still remembered as the “Miracle on Ice.”

“The whole place is erupting, everyone is screaming, and your heart is beating like, just, oh my God,” Sandra said. “It’s like nothing I’ve experienced in my lifetime.”

After her first rally in 2015, she stopped at a fast-food joint for dinner. Standing in line, she looked up at the wall-mounted television, amazed to see the back of her head on cable news clips from the event that had just ended. She was hooked.



Like Sandra, Trump's relentless rallygoers were almost exclusively white. Many were recently retired and had time on their hands and little to tie them to home. A handful never had children. Others were estranged from their families. Several lived paycheck-to-paycheck yet always offered strangers a cold beverage, a prepacked sandwich, or their last cigarette.

Cynthia Barten, who lived in Missouri, relied on disability payments. Her husband, Ken Barten, cut lawns. Jon French sold secondhand items in Kentucky. Kevin Steele quit his job and financed his travels to Trump rallies with a \$120,000 family inheritance. To help pay for her trips, Sandra logged into Wonolo or other mobile phone apps to find odd jobs washing dishes or clearing warehouses in whatever town to which she'd followed Trump's traveling circus.

The group included Trump aficionados who had spent decades keeping tabs on his history of political flirtations, tabloid melodrama, and star turns on reality television. But a surprising number had also voted for Barack Obama at least once, attracted to the Democrat's charisma and fed up with Republicans over foreign adventurism and the growing national debt.

Rally regulars stayed connected through Facebook and text messages, pinging one another to see who was attending the next event, who could carpool, and who wanted to split a hotel room. Two of them had already married and divorced by Trump's second year in office.

Even I earned honorary Joe status after attending more than fifty rallies while working for the *Wall Street Journal*. Members of the group would tell me when they heard about the next rally location, almost always before the media had reported the news. Sandra once called me to

ask if I'd go halves on a hotel room in the Hamptons. She had scraped together \$2,800 for a Trump fundraiser ticket but didn't have enough left for lodging. For numerous reasons—work-related ethical issues and likely objections on the marital front—I declined.

Saundra's life had become bigger with Trump. She met new people like Ben Hirschmann, a Michigan legislative aide who posted on Facebook anytime he had an open seat in his car on the way to a Trump rally. She met Brendan Gutenschwager and flew with him to Hong Kong, where they spent twenty-four hours waving their red, white, and blue Trump flags during the protests over China's extradition laws. She occasionally overnighted about an hour outside of Detroit with Judy Chiodo, a fellow Trump rally-trotter, rather than drive all the way home to Sault Ste. Marie.

In Battle Creek, Saundra waited for Judy at Fazoli's, a restaurant chain founded by the Long John Silver's owners and known for its Submarinos sandwiches and Meatball da Vinci. When they arrived at the rally after lunch, they spent their afternoon huddled in Saundra's car near the arena's entrance. It was too soon to get in line, but never too early to monitor for other early birds. Saundra was scrupulous about her campaign queueing.

"We'll just be quiet, and we'll keep an eye on the place," Saundra explained to Judy, who had been to just two rallies before Battle Creek.

As twilight enveloped the small-town streets, they pulled into a nearby parking lot to leave their cars overnight. Snow started falling by the time they returned to the parking lot a few hours later. Undeterred, they unrolled their sleeping bags in their backseats and tried to sleep.

By 6:00 a.m., Saundra was shivering and awake and went for hot chocolate. And by 9:00 a.m., still more than thirty-six hours before Trump would set foot onstage, she and Judy set down lawn chairs on the sidewalk. First in line

again! Campaign staffers moved the line into a parking garage connected to the arena, and by that evening, as snow fell steadily along with the thermometer, the gang was all there. Brendan arrived and brought friends. Rick Frazier drove in from Ohio. Richard Snowden called to say he'd be late—typical Richard!—and blamed a snowstorm in Buffalo for his delay. They took turns thawing a block away at Griffin Grill & Pub while the others stayed behind and saved the spots in line. Locals passed out hand warmers, hot soup, and Little Caesars pizza. Sandra was delighted to be around friends and nostalgic for the 2016 campaign when so many of them had first met. That year marked the political awakening for her and other Front Row Joes. They had been among the first Americans to identify the resonance of Trump's political appeal and reveled in the victory for years, recounting the blow-by-blow of that triumphant November evening—right along with Trump—at nearly every rally that followed.

Temperatures dipped below freezing the night before the Battle Creek rally, but the soothing nostalgia helped insulate Sandra as she unrolled her sleeping bag right there at the front of the line on the cement of the open-air parking garage. Others pitched tents. Some switched on their space heaters. A few Front Row Joes recalled how Michigan was the first Trump rally site after Special Counsel Robert S. Mueller III released his report into Russian election interference just nine months earlier.

But Battle Creek was going to be bigger. Trump was getting impeached. And it was about to happen right onstage.

1

Battle Creek

“Are they really going to impeach me?”

—*Conversation with staff, White House, December 18,
2019*

Several hours after Sandra and her friends had taken their places in the front row, President Trump was pacing backstage. Back in Washington, Democrats on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives were preparing to saddle Trump with the historic and profoundly unpleasant epithet of an impeached president—what for months Trump could only bring himself to utter as “the I-word.” But in the Midwestern arena 600 miles from the U.S. Capitol, behind the twenty-foot-tall black velvet curtains and inside a large private room with matte gray walls and a drop ceiling of textured square tiles, the president and Trump World’s top lieutenants plotted the path forward. Election Day was less than eleven months away, and his campaign team knew impeachment had some political upside. The first step was to leverage the fortuitous timing of his “Merry Christmas” rally by producing a made-for-TV moment that would steal some of the spotlight from Democrats.

After the House scheduled its impeachment vote for the night of the rally, the plan had been for Trump to burst onto the stage in a defiant display of showmanship, emerging

from backstage through a redbrick fireplace—like a MAGA Santa who had come to inspire deplorable boys and girls and put coal in the stockings of every Democrat and disloyal Republican. But once again, Congress was ruining everything. House lawmakers were still yapping, the vote was running late, and it was already a half-hour past the rally's 7:00 p.m. scheduled start.

Inside the hold room, Trump, in his standard blue suit and red tie, grew impatient and snapped about the relatively small size of the Kellogg Arena. With just 6,200 seats, the venue was about half the size of his typical rally.

Michael Glassner, who oversaw production of Trump's mega-rallies as the campaign's chief operating officer, defended the choice as data-driven and strategic. Ronna McDaniel, the head of the Republican National Committee and a former Michigan Republican chairwoman, chimed in that she had warned everyone that the arena was too small. Brad Parscale, the campaign manager, reassured Trump that impeachment was going to help him win reelection. On the other side of the room, White House deputy chief of staff Dan Scavino, the president's longtime aide and social media adviser, scrolled through his phone. Stephen Miller, the White House's senior policy adviser, huddled with Jared Kushner, the president's son-in-law and senior adviser, about how to respond to the impeachment vote.

Trump turned his attention back to the television tuned to Fox News. He'd been in contact with House Republican leader Kevin McCarthy and didn't want to start the rally until the California lawmaker had delivered his party's final speech before the vote. But Trump also wanted to avoid walking out onstage too close to 8:00 p.m., when Fox News host Tucker Carlson was unlikely to cut away from the opening monologue of his show to feature Trump's rally.

He leaned toward Vice President Mike Pence, who stood nearby waiting for the go-ahead to introduce the president. They discussed their options, and finally Trump decided

he'd waited long enough.

"Fuck it," he said. "It's going to happen while I'm up there. We're going."

Pence headed to the stage, and Trump pointed a finger at Hogan Gidley, a White House press assistant. He instructed Gidley to make a sign with the final vote and show it to him while he was onstage. Then Trump immediately reconsidered his plan and told Gidley to have Kayleigh McEnany bring him the results. It was a campaign event and McEnany was the campaign's press secretary. Plus, she was wearing a bright orange dress that Trump knew he would be sure to spot from the stage.

At 8:03 p.m., just minutes after McCarthy had finished his speech on the House floor back in Washington, Scavino introduced Trump from the backstage microphone wired into the arena's loudspeakers.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome the forty-fifth president of the United States, Donald J. Trump!"

Lee Greenwood's patriotic anthem "God Bless the USA" boomed through the public address system as Trump waited a beat and then made his grand entrance, smiling and clapping his way through the mock fireplace.¹ The crowd erupted in applause and cheers so loud that the cresting roar startled several staffers backstage. Trump basked in the moment. He slowly shuffled along the catwalk, and only stopped clapping long enough to pump his fist or point into the crowd as Greenwood's crooning filled the room. Finally, he reached the lectern, flanked on each side by Christmas trees adorned with glossy gold ball ornaments and crowned with a red "Keep America Great" cap.

"It does not feel like we are being impeached," Trump told his devoted followers. "We did nothing wrong."



One of Trump's first actions as president—just hours after he was inaugurated on January 20, 2017—was to file paperwork for his reelection. After just thirteen months in office, he hired Brad to manage the campaign. No president had announced a reelection bid that early. That meant Trump never really stopped campaigning. It allowed him to perpetually raise money for his political operation and schedule a rally whenever he needed an injection of adulation or to divert attention from controversy in Washington. Jared, Brad, and Ronna struck a deal that braided the campaign and the White House with RNC operations and enabled them to share resources, including staff and office space. Trump had held his ceremonial campaign kickoff at a rally on June 18, 2019, in Orlando, an event that was indistinguishable from every other rally he'd had: nursing grievances, reliving the glory from the 2016 campaign, and never bothering to outline what a second term might entail.

It was a month after that Orlando rally, on July 25, when Trump picked up the phone and repeatedly pressured Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky to help smear his political rivals. Trump wanted Zelensky to spread misinformation about Russian attempts to influence the 2016 election and investigate Joe Biden, the former Democratic vice president who had opened his campaign to unseat Trump just three months earlier. That phone call—paired with Trump's attempt to force Zelensky's hand by blocking \$400 million in military aid for Kyiv—sparked the impeachment inquiry in late September.

The impeachment inquiry, in many ways, marked the actual start of the campaign. It provided purpose and mission to Trump World and offered a desperately needed reason for a fractured Republican Party to unite around the president. Trump always intended to treat his reelection in 2020 as a continuation of his campaign in 2016, even though an incumbent running as a change agent was a

tricky feat to pull off. The impeachment allowed the president once again to cast himself as a victim and Washington outsider.

But the prospect of impeachment left him deeply rattled.



Whenever Trump thought about impeachment—which was often—he would swirl through a narrow range of unhappy emotions: frustration over his helplessness to derail the proceedings in the House; anger that his first three years as president had been almost entirely overshadowed by the Russian election meddling investigation and now eclipsed by impeachment; and bewilderment that his “perfect phone call” with Ukraine had backfired so resoundingly. He said he simply wanted the newly elected Ukrainian president to investigate the political corruption of Joe Biden and his son, Hunter Biden. He never explicitly said it was about the presidential campaign. He constantly peppered aides with questions about whether House Democrats would actually go through with the impeachment proceedings.

“Are they really going to impeach me?” he asked an aide on the morning of the impeachment vote.

If his staff answered affirmatively—and usually that was only Mick Mulvaney, who was the third White House chief of staff by the third year of the presidency—Trump would unspool a furious diatribe complaining that he was always mistreated.

“They’ve got nothing on me!” he would complain.

Trump’s political team, however, recognized the opportunity impeachment provided and tried to contain the emotional fallout from Trump and his family.

“This is terrible,” Eric Trump, the president’s middle child, complained during a lunch at the family hotel in Washington with several members of Trump World.

“They’re going to impeach my father.”

“If they impeach the president, it will be awful and it will be a stain on his record,” said Richard Walters, the Republican National Committee chief of staff. “But it will nearly guarantee he gets reelected.”

When Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi finally stood behind her mahogany lectern and announced opening a formal impeachment investigation into Trump on the evening of September 24, 2019, electricity seemed to pulse through campaign headquarters.

“The president must be held accountable,” Pelosi said in the hall outside her third-floor Capitol office. “No one is above the law.”

Campaign staffers had congregated around the multiple flat-screen TVs mounted on the dark gray walls behind the communication team’s cubicles. When Pelosi finished her speech, Brad turned to Tim Murtaugh, the campaign’s communication director. Murtaugh, a slim and serious political veteran, shook his head in disbelief as he watched the screen.

“Okay,” Brad said. “Go.”

Murtaugh’s team of about a dozen aides—his staff would ultimately grow to more than 100—leaped to action. They blasted out a video, prepped weeks earlier, that mocked the Democrats’ obsession with impeachment. A small army of Trump World surrogates and social media influencers were armed with talking points that had been prepared for days. Brad put his name on an official statement from the campaign that predicted Pelosi’s move would only encourage and energize Trump’s supporters and lead to a landslide victory in 2020.

Gary Coby, the campaign’s digital director, pushed his team’s already aggressive fundraising operation. Their first email after Pelosi’s announcement played off a promise from Trump earlier in the day to declassify a rough transcript of his phone call with Zelensky. The email subject